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ACTION DRL-00

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
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SUBJECT: DRL A/S LOWENKRON AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE DELEGATION'S  
VISIT TO HO CHI MINH CITY

1. (SBU) Summary: In an intensive one-day visit February 21, DRL Assistant Secretary Barry K. Lowenkron met with HCMC Party Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet, HCMC MFA representatives, prominent

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political dissidents and protestant house church leaders. He also met with civil society, local NGO, and legal reform experts at a dinner hosted by the Consul General. Assistant Lowenkron reviewed for his official hosts the results of the just-conducted Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi and stressed that human rights and religious freedom must be an integral part of the fabric of our overall bilateral relationship. He called for tangible progress on human rights concerns in advance of the President's trip to Vietnam to attend the APEC Summit. Triet and HCMC External Relations Officials stressed their commitment to improved bilateral relations and welcomed continued dialogue on human rights.

2. (SBU) Summary Continued: House church leaders told the Assistant Secretary that conditions for their congregations had improved throughout much of Vietnam, although they face sporadic problems with poor local implementation of Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. In contrast to general improvements elsewhere, conditions in the Northwest Highlands remain acute. Until the GVN ensures that the legal framework is implemented fairly and consistently, they will hold off on registration. HCMC political dissidents were firm that there could be no real political or religious freedom reform without ending the Party's monopoly on power. The dissidents favored Vietnam's WTO accession, but called for continued international engagement to ensure increased personal freedoms for Vietnamese. The Assistant Secretary was accompanied throughout by Susan O'Sullivan, DRL Senior Advisor, Patricia Davis, National Security Council, Michael Orona, Deputy Director, DRL, and John Adams, EAP/MLS Vietnam desk officer.

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3. (SBU) In a friendly and relaxed meeting, subsequently highlighted in HCMC press, HCMC Party Secretary and Politburo member Nguyen Minh Triet told the Assistant Secretary that he is happy that the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship is "being consolidated." Vietnam's policy is to not focus on our troubled past history, but to focus on future cooperation. Triet wanted the U.S. to contribute more to Vietnam's development, especially, economic. He noted positively, Intel Corporation's decision to open a new chip-making facility in HCMC.

4. (SBU) Turning specifically to human rights issues, Triet said that although differences remain, both sides are talking openly and frankly and are building a better mutual understanding. He maintained that the vast majority of Vietnamese enjoy broad freedoms, religious groups are expanding rapidly, and the Vietnamese press is becoming increasingly active and assertive. In this context, the complaints of a few individuals such as Quang Do (General Secretary of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam) or Nguyen Dan Ly must be put into the appropriate context. Triet stated that Vietnam's legal system must be respected and "law breakers" punished. The U.S. assessment of human rights conditions in Vietnam should be based on the experience of the majority, not on the complaints of a small minority, Triet stated. Vietnam has suffered much in the

past; above all, the Vietnamese people need and want stability and development.

15. (SBU) Looking ahead to the President's trip to Vietnam in November 2006 to attend the APEC summit, the Assistant Secretary emphasized that the USG was committed to building the best and most comprehensive relationship possible with Vietnam. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's historic meeting with the President in June 2005, has led to greater progress on economic, political, regional, social, health and other fronts. The United States looks forward to Vietnam playing a more robust leadership role in the ASEAN region on issues such as Burma.

16. (SBU) Human rights and religious freedom are a key component of this mosaic and a focus of the President, Secretary Rice and Congress, the Assistant Secretary told Triet. There are real gaps in our views approaches on human rights issues that need to be discussed -- the Human Rights Dialogue that the U.S. and Vietnam resumed the day before in Hanoi (reftels) was a good beginning in what needs to be a results-oriented process. He told Triet that Ambassador-at-large for religious freedom John Hanford had stayed behind in Hanoi to build on progress and to seek to resolve outstanding religious freedom concerns.

17. (SBU) The Assistant Secretary outlined the Secretary's three fundamentals of democratization for Triet: the ability of people to organize themselves and to debate issues freely in an open and fair political process; the ability of NGOs to contribute to the building of society; and, the development of effective government that responds to people's needs. Our engagement with Vietnam and other nations on human rights issues is conducted within that framework. However, there is no one path or formula to democracy and the Secretary has said clearly that democracy cannot be imposed from the outside, points that Triet welcomed. Previewing his upcoming meetings with political dissidents and Protestant house church leaders (that the GVN earlier had sought to block), the Assistant Secretary emphasized that it is vital that he be able to hear the entire gamut of views -- minority as well as the majority -- in Vietnam. Shaking hands with the Assistant Secretary, Triet said that he looked forward to building a strong partnership with the United States.

#### MEETING WITH HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS -----

18. (SBU) The Assistant Secretary and his delegation met with three key leaders in HCMC's Protestant house church community; Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan, Chairman of the United Gospel Outreach Church and President of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship; Pastor Doan Trung Tin, Director of the Vietnam Good News Mission; and Pastor Nguyen Ngoc Hien, Chairman of the Vietnam Baptist Fellowship Church. The three leaders noted that overall conditions for house churches had improved substantially over the past 18 months. International pressure, field visits by U.S. Mission officers within Vietnam, and the GVN's promulgation of a new legal framework on religion led to these positive developments. Harassment of house church communities has declined substantially. Local church leaders increasingly find that if they push back, the police increasingly generally back-down. However, some communities still face a climate of fear that dissuades some parishioners from attending services. In other cases, local officials remain intransigent and continue to obstruct the operations of specific congregations.

19. (SBU) All three pastors noted that conditions in Northwest Highlands are the exception to the overall positive trends in expansion of religious freedom. They cited a series of incidents -- especially in Ha Giang province -- in which local police officials issued orders to disrupt prayer meetings and obstruct the registration process for those churches that wish to legalize their activities under the new legal framework. For example, local church leaders were detained and possibly beaten for seeking to travel to Hanoi to obtain certificates of affiliation with the GVN-recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North). The certificates are needed in the registration process, the pastors explained. In other cases, local officials deny religious groups identity documents or assistance if they openly affiliate with Protestantism. Pastor Tin also asked the Assistant Secretary to press the GVN to release imprisoned Pastor Ma Van Bay. (Note: Pastor Bay was included in the list of prisoners of concern that the Assistant Secretary handed to the GVN during the Human Rights Dialogue.)

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110. (SBU) Neither Pastor Nhan nor Pastor Hien have moved forward to register their congregations under the new legal framework. They explained that the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) have imposed requirements that contradict the legal framework. For example, the Ordinance on Religion and Belief requires churches with operations in more than one province to submit a unified application to the central-level CRA. However, in reality, the CRA has mandated that the churches register first at the provincial level. Provincial authorities require that churches

submit a list of worshipers as a precondition for registration even though this is not required by the legal framework. Moreover, in some instances, worshipers have faced local police harassment following submission of the registration application. In an extreme case in the Mekong Delta province of Kieng Giang, one house church was forced to cease operations completely after it submitted its registration request. Pastor Hien noted that central-level MPS and CRA officials told him that all of Vietnam's Baptist organizations must merge into one group prior to registration and recognition or face a "delay" in the registration process would be delayed. The pastors underscored their willingness to register in compliance with the legal framework but the process must be "clean, transparent and consistent."

¶11. (SBU) In response to a question from the Assistant Secretary, the pastors noted that they did not think that

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religious freedom violations were orchestrated by the central government. However, while pointing the finger at incompetent local officials, central-level officials were not doing enough to ensure even implementation of the law. They bemoaned the fact that while MPS officials continue to keep them under close surveillance and urge them not to deal with USG and international press, they do not act proactively to halt local abuses when those come to their attention. Hien said that he told MPS officials that "goodwill has to come from both sides."

¶12. (SBU) Pastor Tin spoke about his upcoming participation in a meeting in the United States with the Institute For Global Engagement (IGE). The Institute's president, Chris Seiple, invited him to discuss differences in religious laws between Vietnam and the United States. Tin and a Pastor of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (Siu Y Kim) were invited along with five GVN representatives. Tin said that he requested to travel separately from the GVN delegation, but the GVN refused. Tin added that the Chairman of U.S.-Vietnam Friendship Organization invited Tin and Kim to Hanoi last week to meet with the GVN delegation to discuss the visit. Tin said he was reluctant to go, but the GVN said that Seiple made such a meeting a precondition of the visit. During the meeting in Hanoi, the two pastors were reportedly told that they were expected to act as members of a unified delegation and to uphold Vietnam's image overseas. Tin's statements at the conference and any individual meetings would be approved by the GVN head of delegation. Tin said that, despite the pressure and his reservations, he would travel to the United States, but if he remained silent during the conference, it would be a sign that he was not allowed to tell the truth.

¶13. (SBU) The Assistant Secretary emphasized that religious freedom is high on the President's agenda and an integral part of the U.S. human rights agenda. That is why the Secretary asked Ambassador Hanford to participate in the Human Rights Dialogue with Vietnam. The Assistant Secretary noted that the pastors' reports confirmed what he had previously heard: central-level officials may be somewhat more tolerant, but the emphasis is still to find ways to make Vietnamese citizens conform. The Assistant Secretary said that he would do everything in his power to advance the pastors' efforts in Vietnam.

#### DISSIDENTS

¶14. (SBU) Human rights and democracy activists Nguyen Dan Que, Tran Khue, Do Nam Hai (aka Phuong Nam) told the Assistant Secretary that they were determined to continue the struggle to

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bring political reforms to Vietnam. Que said that the Vietnamese people have no freedom of expression and have no opportunity to change their government. The Vietnamese people are "fed-up" with corruption and question the competence of government leadership. There has been 20-years of economic reform (Doi Moi) but Vietnam is still backward.

¶15. (SBU) The dissidents welcomed Vietnam's accession to the WTO as Vietnam's participation in a rules-based system will hasten the decline of the Communist Party. That said, the GVN must accept the universal values of human rights and democracy as part of WTO membership. Que said that the USG's negotiating strategy on WTO should be designed to "tip the balance" from the State-Owned sector to the private sector (to weaken the GVN and Party's hold on Vietnamese society). Que called on the U.S. to find and promote new possibilities for enhanced cultural and information exchange, which are particularly significant for Vietnam's youth. Que also said that the USG should focus on strengthening the independence of the National Assembly and of weakening the hold of the Party over the GVN. Citing the series of strikes in the HCMC area in the early 2006, Que called on the USG to support the creation of independent labor unions in Vietnam. Que requested President Bush to meet with leading dissidents when he visits Vietnam for APEC in 2006: such a meeting would send a powerful signal to the Communist regime, he

said.

16. (SBU) Former Communist Party member Tran Khue said that he and other dissidents thank the USG for its support for democracy, freedom, and a lawful Vietnamese constitution. Khue and Do Nam Hai welcomed USG engagement with Vietnam on human rights issues and the restarting of the Human Rights Dialogue. Khue told the Assistant Secretary that in December 2005, he and Do Nam Hai helped launch an e-newspaper, the "Voice of Democracy," which would be the official publication of democracy activists in Vietnam and an effort to promote freedom of expression in Vietnam. Khue said that in near future he and other dissidents would establish a National Association of Vietnamese Against Corruption. They also plan to form a Vietnamese Democratic Party. Following formation of the party, they would call for a free general election in 2007 to be monitored by the international community to elect members of the National Assembly. On February 23, Khue would travel to Hanoi to visit other activists. While conservatives in the Communist Party continue to block reform to protect their vested interests, Vietnam's democratization is moving ahead. Vietnamese want to become "owners" of their country, through a process of peaceful dialogue and grassroots organization.

17. (SBU) Do Nam Hai added that while he welcomed USG and international support for Vietnam's democratization, the Vietnamese people themselves must drive and lead the process. He told the Assistant Secretary that, following the launch of the "Voice of Democracy" website, he was detained and questioned by police for 24 hours and subsequently fined 20 million Dong (USD 1,300) under GVN Decree 31 "for the distribution or intent to distribute" unapproved materials, (which happened to be copies of his own manuscript calling for political reform and a referendum on one-party rule in Vietnam). Khue noted that authorities prevented him from traveling to the Netherlands to attend a human rights conference and that he was blocked when he tried to visit dissident Hoang Minh Chinh in his home in Hanoi late last year.

18. (SBU) The Assistant Secretary praised the activists for their efforts and stressed that while Vietnam had made substantial economic progress over the past twenty years, it was the USG's view that Vietnam could not reach its potential unless it made corresponding progress on human rights and democracy. The Assistant Secretary added that he fully concurred with Do Nam Hai's assessment that Vietnamese must shape and lead of democratization efforts. That said, the U.S.-Vietnam relationship would include a full and frank discussion of human rights to encourage and support indigenous efforts.

19. (U) A/S Lowenkron has cleared this message.  
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